

# Teamster Leader

Matt Merrigan

**TEAMSTER POWER.** By Farrell Dobbs. Pathfinder Press.  
Paperback. £1.25.

THIS BOOK IS the second of an autobiographical trilogy by Farrell Dobbs, one-time leader of the Teamsters in Minneapolis and St. Paul, the twin cities of Minnesota from approximately 1933-1940. It is a chronicle of the battle of the Trotskyist leadership and the membership of General Drivers' Local 574 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (I.B.T.), to unionise the trucking industry initially in Minneapolis and then throughout the State of Minnesota.

It goes on to detail the battles, strategies, frame-ups of union militants and the harassment of the leadership of Local 574 by police, employers, the right-wing international leadership of the I.B.T. and the American Federation of Labour, of which the I.B.T. were affiliates.

Farrell Dobbs, a life-long Trotskyist, together with Trotskyist colleagues in the Minneapolis area, showed how a group of politically motivated, dedicated and talented rank and file leaders can influence, lead and ultimately control a local union (or Branch in Irish terms) and subsequently extend their influence and control on a wider national basis around militant trade union demands, and articulate and struggle with the rank and file for these demands.

The narrative also depicts the inner conflicts that took place between the new Minnesota Teamster syndrome responding to the needs to create a new broad inter-state solidarity on class struggle lines and the narrow stifling craft business union philosophy of Tobin and the international leadership of the I.B.T. and the A.F.L. under Green's leadership. The introduction of gangster tactics by the I.B.T.'s International Board to liquidate Local 574 after it was pushed out of the International Union is not unique in the annals of American trade unionism. In fact, two murders are recorded, one the murder of Pat Corcoran, Secretary/Treasurer of the Minneapolis Teamsters' Joint Council on November 17th, 1937, and the murder of William S. Brown, President of Local 544 (Local 574 being re-coded 544 after the Tobin re-organisation in 1936 following two years' suspension from the International Union).

Dobbs also analyses the growing split of the Congress of Industrial Organisations (C.I.O.) away from the enervating craft-oriented and conservative A.F.L. He tells of his attempts to secure a charter from the C.I.O. but this body's refusal to accept other than industrial process workers' bitterly disappointed him and his colleagues in the Minneapolis Drivers' Local.

The close collaboration between the Trotskyist leaders of the Minneapolis Teamsters and the Trotskyist wing of the Socialist Party is stressed by Dobbs. He admits that continuing discussion and consulta-

Inevitably, the anti-Stalinist polemic against the members of the Communist Party breaks

tion between the national leaders of the Trotskyist faction in the Socialist Party, Jim Cannon and Albert Goldman, on tactics played a key role in the success to unionise the Truckers in eleven mid-Western States, representing half a million workers. One suspects, however, that Dobbs attaches too much importance to this aspect of the operation and his desire to ascribe undue credit to the Socialist Workers' Party national leadership diminishes the role of his local colleagues of whatever political tendency, in the union.



Matt Merrigan

the surface. Charges and counter-charges of racketeering and employer finger-men are made repeatedly to sanctify Dobbs' position and the position of his close political colleagues in the Union. Whilst Dobbs alludes to Stalinist influence at other levels of the Labour Movement, namely the Central Labour Council (the equivalent of our Trades Councils) and in the developing C.I.O. context, one looks in vain for a truck driver in Minneapolis, or even Minnesota, who was a Communist Party member or sympathiser. If there was, Dobbs didn't want to know, or more importantly, want his readers to know.

However, that is the stuff of politics and it remains for truck drivers or truck driver Union leaders, not sharing then or now Dobbs' politics, to redress the balance.

This is a book for the initiated. A book by a militant about militants of the past for militants of today. Trade Union leaders, like political leaders, are shaped by and shape in turn, the events and historical period of their involvement. Dobbs' decision to leave the I.B.T. after paradoxically being offered by Tobin a position attached to the International Board of the I.B.T., to work full-time for the small Socialist Workers' Party, was a major unselfish decision consistent with his stated position on the developing war situation in 1939/1940.

Dave Beck and Jimmy Hoffa, whom Dobbs mentions in his narrative as then Area Officials, went on to make infamous names for themselves at the top of the Teamster's Union. Dobbs' commitment to revolutionary socialism insulated him against the corrupting process of bureaucratic Teamster power.